

UMass Lowell Center for Public Opinion Research

Citizen Attitudes about Sports, Concussions and CTE

May 31-June 6, 2016

N=1000 American adults
Sampling error +/- 4.2 percentage points for all respondents

See <http://uml.edu/polls> for full questionnaire/topline results and detailed methodology disclosure.

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HIGHLIGHTS

In May/June of 2016, the Center for Public Opinion Research at UMass Lowell surveyed a representative sample of 1000 American Adults on their attitudes about Sports that included a series of questions about sports safety for children, recognition of concussions and CTE as a public health problem, and the response of professional and college sports organizations to mounting evidence about issues caused by repeated brain injuries, including CTE.

Findings in brief:

- There is widespread awareness that concussions and post-concussion syndrome are caused by sports and represent a significant public health issue
- Majorities of Americans would favor changes to youth sports; large majorities do not believe that tackle football or heading the ball in soccer are appropriate until they reach high school. This is true among both men and women.
- Professional, college and national sports organizations, by and large, are viewed by the public as having done too little to address the concussion issue in sports.

Findings in detail:

A large majority of Americans believe that concussions/CTE are a serious problem/public health Issue

- 65% say that concussions and head injuries in sports constitute a major problem; 29% say a minor problem and only 6% of respondents say that concussions are not much of a problem or not a problem at all
- 85% say that is either certainly true (31%) or probably true (54%) that there is a settled science that playing football can cause Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy.
- 87% agree that brain trauma that results in CTE is a serious public health issue

- 6% know someone who has been diagnosed with Post-Concussion Syndrome
- Majorities of Americans in all demographic sub-categories analyzed view concussions as a major problem. This includes majorities that among subgroups that we might believe are more resistant to mounting evidence of the harm caused by repeated brain injuries: a majority of men (58%), parents (63%) and those who watch sports on TV twice a week or more (66%) view concussions/head injuries as a major problem.
- Advocacy and media coverage of CTE, along with several high profile deaths of star athletes appear to have impacted public opinion. For instance, we saw no difference in responses to whether there is a settled science that playing football causes “brain injuries” compared to whether saying playing football “can cause a progressive degenerative disease called Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy or ‘CTE.’” A majority of the public appears to be aware of CTE and specifically the link between playing sports and CTE.

A majority of Americans do not think it is appropriate for children to participate in tackle football before the age of 14 (including a majority of men and frequent sports watchers)

- Only 21% of respondents surveyed believe it is appropriate to introduce tackling in football at either all ages (9%) or for those 10 years and up (13%) compared to 78% who believe that tackling should be introduced at 14 years or older (36%), 18 years or older (21%) or Never (20%). Among women, opposition to tackle football is the strongest -- 94% oppose tackle football before the age of 10, and 84% oppose tackle football before the age of 14. But, even among men (72%) and sports fans (74%), large majorities oppose tackle football prior to the age of 14.
- Additionally, 63% say of American adults say that is either certainly false (23%) or probably false (40%) that tackle football is a safe activity for children before they reach high school compared to 37% who say that is certainly true (6%) or probably true (31%)
- But even though a majority agrees that tackle football (52%) is a safe activity for children during high school, a sizable minority says the statement is either certainly false (16%) or probably false (32%)
- Relatedly, 25% say that Pop Warner football has not done enough to address to address new evidence about concussions and brain injuries in sports compared to 11% who say they have made appropriate changes and 4% who say they have done too much. Since most Americans may not have a working knowledge of Pop Warner Football (60% say they don't know), we are especially interested in those who register an opinion – of the 414 respondents who registered an opinion of the response of Pop Warner Football, 62% said they had not done enough.

A majority of Americans also do not think it is safe for children to head a soccer ball before they reach high school

- Survey respondents were also asked for their views on heading the ball in soccer --- 60% say that is either certainly false (14%) or probably false (46%) that heading the ball in soccer is safe for

children before they reach high school compared to 40% who say that it is probably true (34%) or certainly true (6%)

Many Americans are unaware of responses by Professional and College Sports Organizations to the concussion issue; those that are aware rate the responses of the NFL, NCAA, NHL (and others) as inadequate

- Our survey also asked respondents if various organizations had made appropriate changes, had not done enough, or had done too much in response to new evidence about concussions and brain injuries in sports. Given that 41% of our respondents report that they watch sports on television once a year or less (4% once a year, 19% almost never, 18% never), it should not be surprising that in many cases, “don’t know” was a popular answer (indeed, it is modal answer for 7 of the organizations we asked about). However, if we look at those who watch sports at least two days a week (29% of the sample), the results are telling. Sports fans are overwhelmingly negative about the response of major organizations.
 - No organization has been more at the center over the concussion issue than the National Football League. Fans do not believe the NFL has been responsive enough to the concussion issue: 38% of those who frequently watch sports say the NFL has made appropriate changes compared to 52% who say the NFL has not done enough; 4% say they have done too much and 16% say they don’t know.
 - The NCAA and NHL receive similar evaluations. Among frequent sports watchers, 27% say the NCAA has made appropriate changes compared to 48% who say they have not done enough; 1% say they have done too much and 25% say they don’t know. Among the same group (frequent sports watchers) 21% say the NHL has made appropriate changes, 45% say they have not done enough; 3% say they have done too much and 31% say they don’t know.
 - While don’t knows are high for other groups (51% local school district; 55% USA hockey and 55% US Soccer Federation), the number who say “not enough” is about double of those who say “appropriate changes” in just about every instance: 30% to 15% for Local School Districts, 30%-12% for USA Hockey and 27%-14% for the US Soccer Federation.
 - Sports organizations clearly need to do a better job of communicating with the public about steps they have taken and are taking to take concussions/head injuries more seriously. But additionally, the public is unconvinced that the sports organizations asked about in this survey have made appropriate changes or are taking concussions seriously. No organization asked about does better than 22% of the public affirming that they have made “appropriate changes,” and that is the NFL, who also has the highest negatives on the question.